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Online Community Engagement when Talking About Infidelity: The Case of Reddit

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Extended Abstract

Writing or talking about upsetting events on social media has many benefits for posters, especially in forums such as Reddit that support pseudonymity. The act of writing in itself has therapeutic effects on mental health [5]; posters can find others who share similar experiences, thus addressing feelings of loneliness and isolation [2]; and posters can receive social support.

Community engagement is a prerequisite for obtaining support on social media. In this study, we investigate community engagement for social media about a specific stressful life event, the experience of infidelity. What constitutes infidelity varies from person to person. Here, we focus on people reporting that a romantic partner has done something which the person perceives as an act of infidelity. We chose Reddit, as this platform encourages pseudonymous discussion. Using unsupervised clustering, we create a typology of posts and comments that elicit different levels of community engagement and discuss implications for the management of online communities.

Data: A total of 1656 Reddit posts and 30745 associated comments (19.0% OP (original poster) replies) were collected using the Reddit API in the first half of 2018. Of these, 24905 comments were by the community, and the remainder by the OPs.

Method: For determining post and cluster types, we focused on features that describe interaction and a potentially relevant aspect of content, partner gender. Features for posts include the number of comments, the number of OP comments, the time span of the discussion, and the post score. A rule-based classifier was used to determine partner gender. Features for comments included the number of upvotes of comments, and the time delay between comments and the opening post.

Underlying types of posts and community comments were inferred using exploratory model-based clustering [4]. For post-hoc analysis of relevant linguistic aspects of the clusters, we used LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count; [3]). Despite its shortcomings, LIWC allows us to generate useful hypotheses about posters' and commenters' feelings and attitudes. Replies by the original poster (OP) to other comments were classified depending on whether OP perceived the comment to be supportive.

Results: 788 (47.8%) of all 1646 posts talk about a male partner, 709 (43.0%) are about a female partner, and for 149 (9.0%), partner gender is inconclusive. Five clusters are found: Male Partner, high community engagement; male partner, low community engagement; female partner, high community engagement; female partner, low community engagement; inconclusive partner gender.

OPs in the groups that attract more community engagement often ask for concrete suggestions and advice, react positively to comments that are detailed, actively participate in comment discussion, and rarely use swear words or internet slang. OPs who mentioned a male partner were more likely to talk about themselves, and about negative emotions, but they were somewhat less likely to receive community feedback than OPs talking about a female partner. Although OPs in the “inconclusive gender” cluster are less active in comment discussion than others, they receive more community engagement than other groups. Linguistic analysis shows that OPs in this cluster focus on describing their own feelings and emotions (anxiety, sadness) instead of talking about their partner.

For comments, model-based clustering also yields five clusters. In *Affective* comments, the largest group, words related to affect and positive emotions dominate. *Social* comments are similar, but they are the most highly rated of all five clusters, and contain more social language. Both types of comments do not tend to receive replies. In *Self-Disclosing* comments, redditors share their own experience of infidelity, and will often relate this to the OP’s situation. These comments tend to receive replies from the community, but not from the OP. *Analytic* comments are the shortest and are likely to receive replies from other redditors, and sometimes also from the OP. They show the least affect. Finally, *Debate* comments are the longest. They tend to address the OP directly, talk about other people and express anger, and they receive comments both from the community and from the OP themselves.

Implications for Design: Our findings suggest clear guidelines for posters that seek community support and engagement when talking about a stressful life event, such as the experience of infidelity: ask for concrete advice, engage positively with comments, and minimise swearing. The five types of comments highlight the diversity of community engagement. While self-disclosing commenters might not directly address OP’s requests for social support, such additional self-disclosure is a key part of overall community building [1], and encourage future posters to disclose stressful life events to the community. In future work, we will investigate characteristics of comments that are perceived as supportive, opportunities for detecting mental health support needs in posts and comments.

References

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